

# Striking a balance

JOHN  
MCNEE

A former hill sheep farm undergoing a massive transformation into a sprawling commercial woodland, Broadmeadows Estate appears to tick all the boxes in terms of form, function and profitability. So what is the key to its success?

**A**LEC Telfer came to forestry fairly late in life. Born into farming families, he and his wife Jane managed several sites before purchasing Broadmeadows, near Selkirk in the Scottish Borders, in 1992.

Covering a total area of 577.21 hectares, this hill farm was in a rough condition when they took it on, but they worked hard to improve the land and infrastructure, while raising flocks of blackface sheep.

Their children, Kirsty and Euan, did not follow them into the farming life. That, combined with a health scare in 2017, prompted Alec to seek a transformative shift on the land that would create a lasting legacy for his family beyond agriculture.

It wasn't the first time he'd looked into diversification. He'd pursued planning for a wind farm, but neighbours objected. He looked into hydro power, but SEPA wasn't supportive. Solar power was considered, but there wasn't capacity in the line to hook it up. While he dabbled in tree planting, this was mostly small areas of broadleaves to improve the farm's aesthetic appeal.

In the meantime, the sale of their second farm at Peebles provided them with enough money to buy a small parcel of forestry back at Broadmeadows, some of which was ready to be harvested.

"I had always been interested in trees, but that really sparked my interest," Alec said. "The timber price was right and I could see there was profit to be made in forestry. So I spoke to Jeremy Thompson at Forest Direct and asked him about planting a bit of the farm – a big bit."

Alec and Jeremy sat down together worked out a plan for funding, planting and profit, not only to assure themselves it was a good idea, but to convince Jane, who was sceptical, to say the least, and didn't want to give up on livestock entirely.

The scheme they devised would see 80.79 hectares of grassland in good, fertile condition remain in agricultural production, while 265 ha of hills and poorer upland pastures would be planted with



predominantly commercial conifers.

The species mix would break down into 54 per cent Sitka spruce, with eight per cent Scots pine, six per cent Douglas fir, six per cent Norway spruce, 10 per cent native broadleaves and eight per cent low-density native broadleaves, with eight per cent of open ground.

"We planned it in such a way that it wasn't just a blanket of Sitka," said

Alec. "I still needed a big bit of Sitka, because it needs to have a commercial future.

It's all right having some of these hardwoods for the benefit of the landscape, but that doesn't cut it when it comes to revenue. I wanted to leave a legacy for my family.

"It's mixed in such a way that it worked for getting into the Woodland Carbon Code. That's the icing on the cake. I thought if we could get carbon credits, that's something I could sell to become part of my pension. My daughter's been told she'll get the

land, trees and cottages, but she won't get any carbon. That's mine to spend."

The first step in developing the Broadmeadows scheme was a series of extensive surveys covering biodiversity, heritage, landscape, soils and tree selection. The findings were used to develop an initial design which was shared with the local community whose feedback was incorporated into the scheme.

According to Jeremy of Forest Direct, this was a process which threw a couple of obstacles into their way.

"Black grouse was a big issue," he said. "We had a very difficult meeting with Scottish Forestry's advisor, where he wanted the top half of the scheme to be removed. Alec quite rightly was not willing to contemplate doing that. He put his foot down, insisting we would do it all or none of it. It was a very brave move to make, but he stuck to his guns and we got approval. That was a major hurdle that could have scuppered the whole thing. And since then we've seen black grouse quite regularly. So the interesting thing is, in the early stages of woodland creation, the habitat is actually ideal for black grouse. We've seen that across a number of sites."

After successfully submitting the application to the Forestry Grant Scheme and registering with the Woodland Carbon Code, the next step was to get some roads built.

"A lot of trees are planted without much thought put into how to get them out," said Alec. "I thought if I made a road right now, that would prevent having to worry about access in the future. We managed to get funds to do it and we had rock on site, which was important."

Funding, separate from the woodland grant application, was secured for 9.5 km of rolling footpaths which would provide access to the planting team.

Borders Forestry, run by Chris Reid, was hired to plant 567,000 saplings supplied by Maelor Nurseries, completing the job by April 2019, in just one planting season.

"It was a huge effort put in by about 20 tree planters," said Jeremy. "What is an issue on all woodland-creation sites, particularly on lower, more fertile ground, is the amount of grass. So that did require chemical weeding.

"The first two years had losses that we had to beat up. But the important thing is that Alec was prepared to fund that. 60 per cent of the forestry grant scheme is the capital costs. 40 per cent is then divided into five years for maintenance. But what you generally find is you need to spend the money in the first two years to get the trees established and away. So he was willing to fund the weeding, getting the stock back up. That was really important. Subsequently, the cost has been much lower.

"The other issue for many farmers and landowners is you don't get the capital grant until after all the work's been done. It takes about three to six months for the actual money to come through. So, again, he had to take out a bridging loan to cover all the costs, which was quite a significant amount of money.

"These big planting schemes are all very well for the big pension schemes and investment firms in London. But this is one of the drawbacks for the landowners we work with. They have to carry that cost. They don't get the money for the first year's maintenance until the end of the first year. Having got the grant money back maybe six months after the planting is completed, they're then having to invest straight away in maintenance work. These are the sorts of things we'd like to see forestry consider to make it easier for owners."

Alec estimated that around 40,000 trees have had to be replaced since that initial planting – a fairly small percentage and especially impressive considering the site has no deer fencing. Instead, Alec hired a retired Forestry Commission ranger to control the roe deer and brown hare populations. Given the site is bordered by commercial forestry to the north, west and south, this could have proved a huge problem. But Alec said good optics and a rifle had made all the difference.

"Our biggest fear was brown hare," he said. "They'll go up a whole line of saplings and nip them all off out of badness – like a kid with bubble wrap. But in the first year the stalker took out 80. He was the saviour of our woodland.

"He really knows what he's doing. He leaves the resident roe bucks. He doesn't interfere

with them at all, because they chase off the youngsters. Because of that, we didn't need to do any deer fencing, which is a really costly item, not just to build but to maintain.

"I don't do stalking myself. I remember wounding a deer once and it nearly broke my heart. But I'm quite happy for someone else to do it and hand me in some venison."

Five years on, it's clear the strategy has worked and the trees are thriving. Some of the Douglas fir looks especially impressive, comparable to what one might expect to see in the south of England. The Sitka took longer to get going, which Jeremy put down to it being veg prop (vegetatively propagated from cuttings).

"The idea behind it is that it should accelerate the woodland-creation process," he said. "You don't have to grow a tree until it produces cones and seeds before planting. You can bypass all that.

"In practice, because the vascular systems aren't fully developed, they don't put a lot of growth on for the first two or three years, which isn't particularly beneficial if you've got weedy sites and deer and hare running around.

"Not only do they not grow very quickly, but if they do get browsed, it takes them longer to recover and push up new shoots. We did a bit of fertiliser treatment to get the trees to put on



Left page:  
Alec Telfer of  
Broadmeadows  
Estate.

Right page:  
Left: Alec is  
delighted with the  
progress of the  
Douglas fir.

Right: One of Alec's  
first environmental  
projects was  
digging this pond  
with an island,  
now an attractive  
feature on the  
landscape.

Bottom: A total  
of 567,000 trees  
have been planted  
as part of the  
recent project.



ESTATE MANAGEMENT

a bit more growth. Once they did, they started to shade out the heather.”

Or, as Alec puts it: “It took them a while to realise they were supposed to be trees and not just branches. But once they get going, they really get going.”

Alec derives a great amount of pleasure just from driving around the estate, seeing how it has developed in just a short time and imagining how it will look a few years from now. He will frequently encounter members of the public making use of the 9.5 km of paths for walking and cycling or stopping for a rest at one of the carved wooden benches he’s strategically positioned along the route. Already the transformed estate is proving to be a great benefit to the community.

By taking sheep off the hill (those grazing on the fields are the Telfers’ neighbours’, who rent the land), natural regeneration of willow, bilberry and heather are enhancing the habitat for wildlife, including not only black grouse but red grouse, curlew, snipe and golden plover. The new planting has also improved the flow of surface water and created major flood-mitigation benefits.

Alec is currently looking into adding some self-catering cabins on the estate – a business opportunity his daughter and son-in-law are very enthusiastic about, finding it much more appealing than sheep farming.

The idea is to sculpt Broadmeadows Estate into a tranquil, scenic haven in which visitors can experience all the serene beauty of the Scottish countryside – and harvesting operations won’t change that.

“With its improved growth rate, the Sitka will be ready in 30 years as opposed to 45 or 50,” said Alec. “That’s a game changer. What you do is take out a 20-acre block every year or so and keep going around, replanting, and by the time you’ve finished the Sitka, the Norway’s ready to go. Once it’s done, the Douglas is ready. And by the time the Douglas is done, the Sitka’s ready again.

“It’s a fantastic rotation and means when you start harvesting, it’s not devastation of the whole place. Trees remain constant in the landscape. That’s important. You want to make money from the timber, but you also want something nice to look at.”

Forest Direct regards Broadmeadows Estate as one of its premier schemes and a fine example for others to study.

“For a commercial woodland we’ve done everything in a very sensitive manner and actually diversified the species,” said Jeremy. “We haven’t just relied on Sitka spruce. It’s a very balanced project. Only a third of the trees will be harvested in that initial 55-year period. And all the broadleaves are permanent. We consider them nature reserves. We have some open areas which have some interesting flowers with butterflies and various ant hills, which we’ve protected.”

It’s shaping up to be an incredible legacy to leave behind for future generations. And Alec has enjoyed making the transition from farmer to forester.

“It’s been great fun,” he said. “I think the essential bit is having a decent forestry consultant who knows what they’re doing. I’ve learned a lot. The critical part is maintenance, making sure everything’s growing properly and replacing anything that dies.

“At the end of the day, you want a marketable crop of trees. It’s in no-one’s interest to have a scabby wood with nothing worth selling. That’s the problem with a lot of hardwood plantations. They might look nice, but the reality is there’s no commercial aspect. You’ve got to be producing something the sawmills want.

“We were lucky. We got into the Woodland Carbon Code at the right time, which meant I was able to have a decent proportion of the woodland as Sitka spruce. Now it’s a hell of a lot more difficult. If you’ve got any more than 30-per-cent Sitka, you’re not getting in. And I don’t think that’s right.”

It’s a point Jeremy echoed. “We’ve got mixed feelings about the rule change,” he said. “The faster the growth, particularly with the Sitka and the Douglas fir, the quicker they sequester carbon. And if we’re trying to meet net-zero targets, the conifers

will sequester more carbon in that first 50 years than the broadleaves, which might catch up after 100 years.

“The Woodland Carbon Code calculation assumes that once the trees are felled the carbon is all released, but if it goes into timber the life is extended by another 40 or 50 years. That’s something that isn’t accounted for at the moment, but it is really important. Plus it’s home-grown timber. Rather than importing timber from halfway around the world, possibly from protected forests, we’re actually providing our own as a useful alternative to plastic, steel and concrete.”

Alec added: “I know why they changed the rules. They didn’t want people exploiting the Woodland Carbon Code to plant heaps and heaps of Sitka that just blanket the land. “But when you stop and think about it, it’s still wrong.”

So the big question then – in this complex landscape, amid all the rule changes, fluctuating markets and vested interests pitting commercial forestry against biodiversity and so on – how can more farmers and landowners like Alec be

persuaded to make the leap into forestry? The man himself takes a practical view. “Planting trees is not for everybody,” he said. “It suits me because I’m keen on trees. I have a different view. I really didn’t want the fields planted, because there’s hundreds of years of work gone into them, but the hill ground was clearly ideal. “When you stop and think what the return is off that land from sheep and what it will be worth for timber, it’s a no-brainer. I know there’s a delay before you get money, but I’m sure it will be worth it in the end. They reckon timber prices will rocket in the next 30 or 40 years. Demand will go through the roof and supply is going to hit a crisis point. “At the same time, it’s not easy trying to diversify on a farm. There’s a limit to what you can do with the land and planning is a



big issue. I can understand why people object to the planting of blanket Sitka, because it doesn’t look great – whereas I think I’ve got enough diversity to break it up.

“What we do is not agroforestry. We don’t let sheep in to graze among the trees. I don’t think that’s compatible with commercial forestry. And I hate rewilding. The key, to me, is that it has to have commercial worth. You certainly can’t make farmers do anything – I’m an expert at digging my heels in and saying ‘no way’ – but you can provide funding to an extent that makes it financially attractive.

“My advice to others would be to follow the money. You have to be sensible about life. You’re welcome to have this dreamy idea that farming is going to stay the way it is, but if you’re flexible enough and see an opportunity, then take it. I saw an opportunity and thought it was right for me. And I really think we’ve created something special.”

Circle: “My neighbours think I’m nuts,” said Alec. “But I’m quite pleased with it.”

Main: Norway spruce are planted halfway up the hill, followed by a belt of Sitka, with Scots pine on the top.

Top right: Planting was carried out by a team from Border Forestry.

Middle right: Ant hills have to be protected. The slope nearby is planted with hardwoods including birch, oak, aspen and rowan.

Alec planted a few hardwoods in 2005, an early venture into forestry.